

Mixed Messages: Our Obsession with Perfection

Crestwood had seen better days. Weeds grew from cracks in the sidewalks, the 60s cream brick façade had turned a dingy grey, and the chain-linked fence encircling the building had long ago rusted. But it was evident that, despite its imperfections, Crestwood was loved. Bright sunflowers climbed the walls complimented by lush landscaping. Newly stained wooden benches were displayed below a large banner proudly declaring the school's excellence.

I attended Crestwood Elementary with children from our affluent golf course neighborhood. The big brick houses and manicured lawns could have been featured in a magazine. We were taught that through hard work and determination we could achieve anything, and some of us had matured enough to form ambitious goals for our fourth grade selves. I didn't set my sights on being only an academic, athlete, or popular kid. I wanted to do it all, believed I could do it all, and I expected to be flawless at it all. Few of us were recognized as the perfect student, but I had successfully managed thus far, earning straight A's, excelling at my sports, and maintaining a close-knit friend group.

My teacher was Mrs. Haydue. As far as I was concerned, the old lady was as prickly as a cactus. Her only redeeming characteristic was that her husband worked at Cinnabon Corporation, so we would occasionally win small tins of candies. Through dull mornings of arithmetic scribbled on the chalkboard by an incessantly irritable Mrs. Haydue, gym class was our beacon of relief. Especially during the winter months, we excitedly awaited our outdoor adventures. The cold Wisconsin winters readily provided heavy snow falls that would blanket the school grounds. With the forest glittering like a scene from Narnia, there was always a split second of hesitation before we ambled in our snowshoes, marking the perfect, untouched white canvas.

The favorite activity at Crestwood was sledding. Behind the school was a knoll, magnified to a giant mountain from our small perspectives. We would soar down the hill on plastic saucers, occasionally vying for a turn on the few foam sleds with plastic undersides that would propel you faster and farther than any competitors.

On one morning after a particularly wet snowfall, which had made for ideal sledding conditions, we were all buzzing in anticipation of gym class. Mrs. Haydue droned on about mathematics until the bell finally ended her lecture. A whirlwind of excitement carried us to our cubbies bursting with snow gear. My eagerness quickly turned to panic; however, as I realized my baby pink snow pants were absent from their usual hook.

My chest tightened and I struggled to pull oxygen into my lungs. I was frozen in front of my cubby -- staring at the void, willing my snow pants to appear. But I had left them at home, folded next to the garage door. My eyes welled up with tears. I bit the inside of my cheeks, immediately tasting the iron flavor of blood, but was unable to control the salty river that now flowed freely. The mortification of leaving my snow pants and now frustration of crying at school was traumatizing. My best friend's older sister was at the bubbler, and I ran to ask her advice. She was puzzled at why I was so concerned over "not a big deal". But it was a big deal. I had made a huge mistake. Mom had told me to remember my snow pants, but in this task I had failed. I quickly sought refuge from the crowded halls, and my looming error, in the only safe place -- the bathroom. It was old and grimy, but more importantly, it was empty. I sat on the toilet seat in the third stall from the right. Holding my knees tightly to my chest, I tried to slow the sobs and gasps for breath that now wracked my slight frame. But once you start crying, it isn't easy to stop.

As the halls decrescendoeed to silence, I began to slow my breathing. Still, thinking about my failure would cause my red, swollen eyes to again fill with tears. I rocked on the toilet seat feeling ashamed.

Eventually I was found. The wooden hinge door swung open, and I curled tighter in a ball.

“Sidney? Are you in here?” It was Mrs. Haydue. It was futile to avoid her any longer.

“Yes.” I sniffled.

“Why aren’t you with your gym class?”

The moment of truth. My grievous mistake would now be exposed.

“Because I forgot my snow pants.” I whispered, my voice a broken sob.

I sulked out of the stall and Mrs. Haydue encompassed me in a strangely comforting hug. I remember her sympathy at hearing my disgraceful story, but the conclusion of said events is somewhat hazy. Maybe I was reprimanded by my gym teacher for skipping class, by my mom for forgetting my snow pants, and by Mrs. Haydue for quite literally hiding from my mistake. Maybe my classmates were all shocked to hear that perfect Sidney had forgotten her snow gear and had to stay inside during gym class. Maybe I told everyone my eyes were red because I had gotten chalk dust in them from clapping the erasers. One detail I remember clearly. I was mortified and for weeks would relive the incident, promising myself no more failures.

And herein lies the problem. I was age 10. In fourth grade I already expected perfection. I sought to be flawless. And now, age 18, a freshman in college, I still cry. Because who wants to fail? Even in seemingly trifle matters, it’s no easy lesson. I want to be perfect, have the perfect life, the perfect relationship, the perfect grades. I know it’s not realistic, and I know I should not expect these high standards, but nonetheless I do. Because women are exposed at all ages to the

mixed messages of society. We on one hand recognize that perfection is unattainable and on the other hand demand it from ourselves.

Logic tells us that perfection is impossible, and I consider myself to be a very logical person. In moments we may see fleeting glances of it, but they are short-lived. Perfection and life -- perfection and humans -- they don't coexist, and they aren't supposed to. For the beauty of life is in its imperfections. Nevertheless, the constant pressure to be perfect leads many women to seek unrealistic standards, often against their better judgment.

Images of perceived perfection exist everywhere. The media, advertising, literature, music, and other everyday mediums paint unrealistic expectations for woman in all aspects of life. We seek a perfect body, perfect marriage, perfect job: to be a perfect mother, perfect student, perfect employee. But how could we possibly do it all, let alone be perfect at it all? And what I find to be more concerning is that women are portrayed as indifferent. We are supposedly not at all worried about meeting the perfect standards set for us. Today's women are considered too collected, confident, and progressive to give heed to such "absurd" expectations, but that is simply not the truth. Even though we identify that perfection is unfeasible and strive to focus on redefining our standards, we still stress about our faults and failures because society holds a double standard.

The beauty icons and celebrities photo shopped on the front of magazines, the rappers who detail a women's ideal body, even the unspoken expectations of parents who want to see their little girl reach her dreams -- they all demand perfection. It's not necessarily harmful to strive for perfection; it's something that motivates you to be successful. But in striving for perfection, we must not get caught up in the imperfections. Eating disorders, anxieties, and depression are horrifically prevalent among woman in America and largely brought on by one's

perceived imperfections, as defined by our society. We might foster a healthier environment for women if society collectively acknowledged imperfection and embraced it (think Dove's Real Beauty campaign). Perfection is deeply rooted within all aspects of our society, pressuring young girls throughout their journey to womanhood to meet unrealistic standards. It is my hope that someday my daughter will seek perfection as defined by her aspirations and dreams rather than societal expectations, all the while embracing her imperfections, whether they be faults or failures large or small.